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ABSTRACT

Previous research on parents with a retarded child has been ambiguous; some has demonstrated decreased marital quality and greater depression with a retarded child but other research has found no differences between parents with a retarded child and parents without a retarded child. This study attempts to develop and test a conceptual model explaining the differences in marital adjustment and parent satisfaction between parents with a retarded child and those with intellectually average children. Thirty parent couples with a mild to moderately retarded child living at home, all of whom also had a nondisabled child, volunteered for the study. The children ranged in age from 1 to 18. From a group of volunteer parents without disabled children, parents with family systems similar to those of the parents with disabled children were selected. Family strengths, marital adjustment, personal control, parent satisfaction, parental impressions of child temperament, and parental rewards were measured. No significant differences were found between the parent groups on marital adjustment, family strengths, parent satisfaction, and rewards of children. An easily managed child, retarded or not, affected marital adjustment and parental satisfaction. A six-page list of references concludes the paper. (ABL)

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Predicting Marital Adjustment And Parent Satisfaction For Couples Having a Retarded Child

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Abstract

This study reports the results of testing a conceptual model to explain differences in marital adjustment and parent satisfaction in families having a retarded child. Thirty couples with a mild to moderately retarded child were compared with a well-matched control group of parents with intellectually averge children on parent satisfaction, marital adjustment, personal control, and child temperament. The data was analyzed using planned comparisons and path analysis. No signficant differences were found between the two parent groups on the family satisfaction measures. However, parents of retarded children reported a more external control orientation, and perceived their children as having a more difficult temperament. Partial support was obtained for the predictive model in that child temperament was a moderate predictor of parent satisfaction, which in turn was a moderately good predictor of marital adjustment.

PREDICTING MARITAL ADJUSTMENT AND PARENT SATISFACTION FOR COUPLES HAVING A RETARDED CHILD

Numerous studies have been conducted concerning the effects mentally retarded children have on their parents. A number of studies have found decreased marital quality (Holroyd, 1974; Marcus, 1977; Friedrich & Friedrich, 1981). Some authors have indicated increased divorce rates for couples having a retarded child (Price-Bonham & Addison, 1978; Weber & Parker, 1981). However, other researchers have found no apparent negative effects upon the marriage of parents with retarded children (Dunlap & Hollinsworth, 1977; Waisbren, 1980; Williams and McKenry, 1981).

Personality differences have been found between parents of retarded children and normative samples (Erickson, 1968, 1969; Miller & Keirn, 1978). Personality profile patterns of some parents with retarded children have suggested problems in impulse control accompanied by aggressive feelings. Others have shown a greater depressive and dysphoric effect, with fathers especially vulnerable to depression and lowered self-esteem (Cummings, Bayley, & Rie, 1966). Other researchers have found no differences in the mental health of parents with retarded children (Wishart, Bidder, & Gray, 1981; Cacioppo, 1984).

A limited amount of research has dealth with personality characteristics of the child and how this may influence parents of disabled children. Beckman (1983) found that temperament, responsiveness, repetitive behavior patterns, and caregiving demands were significantly related to the amount of stress reported by mothers of handicapped children. Nihira, Meyers, and Mink (1980) reported that the social competence of the retarded child influences parenting ability.

When these findings were integrated, two things became apparent. First, there has been little attempt to explain why some couples appear to have been negatively affected by the presence of a disabled child while for other parents no untoward effects are noted. Secondly, there appeared to be no conceptual framework to integrate the mediating factors of parent and child personality characteristics to help explain variations in parental or marital satisfaction (Crnic, Friedrich, & Greenburg, 1983). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to develop and test a conceptual model to explain differences in marital adjustment and parent satisfaction between families with retarded children and with nondisabled children, by analyzing the relationships between parent satisfaction, marital adjustment, personal control of parents, and the temperament of the child.

Theory and Hypotheses

To explain variations in marital adjustment among parents of retarded children a mediating factor of parent satisfaction was considered. Parent satisfaction was defined as one's sense of well-being or degree of happiness with the parenting role, and the degree of positive evaluation with one's goodness as a parent. It would vary from low satisfaction where parents find more negative aspects than positive aspects in parenting, to high satisfaction where parents feel they have been good parents and find many gratifications in parenting.

Parents of retarded children may experience fewer rewards and a greater burden of care they are less responsive and fulfill fewer parental expectations. This may result in lower satisfaction with parenting and this may in turn have an effect upon the marriage. The increased worries and demands placed upon the parents could leave less time, money, and energy to devote to spousal roles and interaction, and lead to lowered marital adjustment (Featherstone, 1980). However, if parent satisfaction remains high because parents define the situation positively, and have the psychological and financial resources needed to adapt to the challenges of caring for a disabled child (Patterson, & McCubbin, 1983), then the marrriage is less likely to be adversely affected by the presence of a retarded child and marital adjustment will

then remain high.

Several factors could influence the degree of parent satisfaction for the parents of the retarded children. As previously mentioned, parent personality characteristics may be an important factor in explaining variations in parent satisfaction and marital adjustment (Belsky, 1984). McLaughlin and Micklin (1983) stated that experiences with negative, uncontrolled events appeared to cause a shift from feeling personal control in one's life toward an external locus of control orientation.

Rotter (1966) defined locus of control as a generalized belief that one's life is more under personal control than subject to external forces such as fate, luck, or accident. Doherty (1981) added that those having a more internal locus of control are less conforming to social influences, more task oriented, more successful in achievement situations, and report better personal adjustment. The authors posited that parents of retarded children would feel less in control of their lives and have less competence in parenting . They, therefore, would report lower levels of parent satisfaction as well as an accompanying decrease in marital adjustment.

Child temperament, an important child personality characteristic, could be another significant predictor of parent satisfaction. Retarded children may have more

difficult temperaments, being less easily taught, guided, and handled in discipline situations. This may engender more parenting tension and stress, and spouses therefore may report a lower degree of parent satisfaction. Figure 1 presents the theoretical model in schematic form.

Based upon the above rationale, the specific hypotheses for this study include:

1. Parents of retarded children will report lower levels of marital and parental satisfaction than the parents of the intellectually average children.

2. Parents of retarded children will feel less personal control than the parents of average children.

3. Parents of retarded children will evaluate their children as having more difficult temperaments than will the parents of average children.

4. For parents of retarded children there will be a significant positive relationship between the variables of child temperament, personal control, parent satisfaction and marital satisfaction.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

Parents with a mild to moderately retarded child living at home were recruited from two suburban school districts in Omaha, Nebraska, and the Pilot Parents group, a self-help group for parents of disabled children. Subjects were contacted by newsletter and those willing to participate returned participation cards to the researchers. Questionnaires were then mailed out to the subjects and returned by prepaid mailers. Thirty couples responded. All of these families had one or more nondisabled children as well. The retarded school-aged children were enrolled in trainable or educable special education classes. There were 15 boys and 15 girls with the mean age of 8.5 years, and an age range of 1 to 18 (though 80% were younger than 14).

A second group of parents without disabled children were recruited from college classes, churches, and acquaintances on a volunteer basis. From this larger pool of over 65 couples, those couples with a similar family system to the parents of disabled children were chosen as the comparison group.

Previous studies indicated that such factors as family size, family income, and education level of parents could have an influence upon the dependent measures in this study

(Abbott, & Brody, 1985; Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976; Meredith, Cacioppo, & Stinnett, 1984). Therefore, comparison couples were chosen by matching their children with the retarded children on sex, race, age (within one year), and number of siblings (within one). Further selection of the comparison group was done based upon similarity of parents' age, education, years married, and family income. Parents of retarded children were slightly older (38 years to 35), married longer (15 years to 12), and had slightly less formal education (14 years to 15).

Instruments

The questionnaire was composed of six measures. A description of each scale and available validity and reliability information follow.

Family Strengths. This instrument was developed by Olson, Larsen, & McCubbin (1983) and is a 12 item measure of the amount of family pride, trust, loyality and competency in resolving problems. Scores ranged from 12 to 60 with the higher scores indicative of higher level of family strengths. The range of alpha reliabilites reported was .73 to .88, and test-retest reliabilites ranged from .73 to .79. For this study, the scale was highly correlated with Dyadic Adjustment (r=.78, p<.001).

Dyadic Adjustment Scale. This 32 item instrument measures overall marital adjustment. The possible range of scores was 0 to 151; the higher the scores the better the marital adjustment. An alpha reliability of .96 for the total scale was reported by Spanier (1976). A correlation of .86 with the Locke-Wallace Marital Satisfaction Scale was also reported by Spanier.

Personal control. Rotter's (1966) locus of control scale measured the belief that one's personal outcomes are under personal control rather than under the control of external forces such as fate or luck. Each of the 29 items had two statements and respondents selected the alternative more characteristic of themselves. Six items are fillers, therefore, scores ranged from 0 to 23, with the highest scores representing a more internal control orientation. Rotter reported that test-retest reliablity ranged from .49 to .78. Internal consistancy using Kuder-Richardson correlations ranged from .69 to .79. Rotter also provided evidence of construct and discriminant validity.

Parent Satisfaction Scale. Previous researchers have attempted to measure parent satisfaction but no scale with established validity or reliablity was found. Chilman (1983) used a four-item scale, Mullis & Mullis (1982) designed a 14-item scale, and Campbell (1981) used a one item measure. Building on this past research, a 6 item scale using a

nine-point Likert type format was designed. Scores ranged from 9 to 54 with higher scores representing a higher degree of parenting satisfaction. For the current study, the scale had an alpha reliability of .81 with item-total scale correlations ranging from .48 to .73, It was moderately correlated with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (r=.37, p<.001) (see Appendix A).

Parental Impressions of Child Temperament. Several standardized scales were examined (Bates, Freeland, & Loundbury, 1979; Carey, 1980; Martin, 1982; Thomas, Chess, Birch, & Korn, 1963) for possible use, but none were designed to evaluate temperament, as perceived by the parents, for the wide range of child ages needed for this study (Hubert, Wachs, Peters-Martin, Gandou, 1982). Using these scales as a model, especially the temperament categories of Thomas et al. (1963), an 11 item measure of child temperament, using 5 point Likert scaling format of strongly agree to strongly disagree, was developed with a score range of 5 to 55. Higher scores indicated that the parents viewed the child as having a more positive and easy temperament. The scale had an alpha of .85, and item-total correlations ranged from .39 to .70. This scale was moderately correlated with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (r=.31, p<.001); and with the Parent Satisfaction Scale, and (r=.47, p<.01) (see Appendix B).

Rewards of Children Scale. This scale was designed to measure specific rewards that children have for their parents. It originally consisted of a 29-item checklist scaled along a 5-point scale, from very important to no importance. Those items that were found to be associated with high parental satisfaction were then grouped into a smaller, 15 item scale (Meredith & Abbott, 1984). Scores ranged from 15 to 75, and the highest scores indicated that these positive rewards of parenting were most important. With the sample from this study the alpha reliability was .87, with item-total correlations ranging from .33 to .64. This scale had a low correlation with the Dyadic Ajustment (r=.25, p<.001), and with the Parent Satisfaction Scale (r=.18, p<.05) (see Appendix C).

Results

A priori hypotheses were stated, therefore planned directional comparisons were conducted between the group means of parents of retarded children and parents of the intellectually average children on the main dependent measures; see Table 1 (Keppel, 1973; Kirk, 1982; SPSS Inc., 1983).

Table 1 about here

Hypothesis one stated that parents of retarded children would report less satisfaction with family functioning, but no significant differences were found between the two parent groups on family strengths, marital adjustment, parent satisfaction, or rewards of children at the .05 level of probablity.

As predicted by hypothesis two, parents of retarded children reported a more external control orientation than the comparison parents $t=1.65$, $p<.05$. They also perceived their children as having a more difficult temperament than the parents of the nonretarded children ($t=1.84$, $p<.04$) thus supporting hypothesis three.

Path analysis. Hypothesis four was investigated by path analysis. Path coefficients are essentially standardized regression coefficients with the following asssumptions applied to them: a weak, unidirectional, causal ordering of variables, all variables measured on the interval scale, and residual variables not correlated with each other or with the model variables (Pedhazur, 1982). Path coefficients indicate if the data and theory are consistent but do not preclude the possiblity of a different ordering. The path coefficients from multiple regression analysis (SPSSX, 1983) are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

It was hypothesized that child temperament and personal control would predict parent satisfaction, and that parent satisfaction, in turn, would predict marital adjustment. Partial support for the hypothesized relationships was found. For the parents of the retarded children the variables were related as expected: child temperament was moderately related to parent satisfaction (r=58, p<.001) and parent satisfaction was moderately related to marital adjustment (r=.41, p<.01). However, the relationship between personal control and parent satisfaction (r=.11, p<.08), and personal control with marital adjustment, (r=.13, p<.20) were only slightly related.

For the parents of the intellectually average children, the path coefficients showed a slightly different pattern. Child temperament was only slightly related to parent satisfaction (r=.30, p<.10), but moderately related to marital adjustment in a direct pathway (r=.36, p<.01). Also personal control was more strongly related to parent satisfaction (r=.30, p<.02) than it was with the parents of retarded children.

Discussion

One of the main purposes of this study was to use a well-matched comparison group and to determine how the presence of a disabled child in the family is related to the couples' parental and marital satisfactions. Results showed

that there were no significant differences between the parent groups on the main dependent measures of marital adjustment, family strengths, parent satisfaction, and rewards of children.

Several explanations could account for these findings. First, the sample of parents with retarded children could have been an exceptionally well adjusted group. It is possible that only those parents who were coping well volunteered for the study. Also, only couples were selected, in other words only those families that did remain intact were used, no single parents were included. Another factor could be sample size; with a larger group of parents differences might have been evident.

An alternative explanation could be that though there are additional problems in raising a disabled child, many parents do adjust and cope, and their parenting and marital satisfaction remain high. Most of the parents with retarded children were recruited from school or community support groups, and this experience might be especially valuable for dealing with the challenges of raising a disabled child.

A third explanation also could be considered. Wikler (1981) noted that parents may experience that greatest stress when disabled children are young, prior to school entry. When a subsample of all parents having children six years or

younger were selected, (13 couples from each group), the parents of the retarded children had lower dyadic adjustment scores ($\underline{M}$=106) than the comparison parents ($\underline{M}$=113). It may be that at certain critical periods the parents would are more vulnerable to parenting and marital stress, and thus, more adversely affected by raising a disabled child.

Another possibility for explaining our findings could be the fact that the spouses may be differentially influenced by the presence of a disabled child. On dyadic adjustment and parent satisfaction, fathers scored consistently lower than mothers; and on family strengths, fathers ($\underline{M}$=45) reported significantly lower family strength scores than did mothers ($\underline{M}$=49, $\underline{p}$<.05).

Men are socialized for instrumental roles and tasks, and have less training, experience, and social support for performing expressive roles of caretaking, comforting and helping (Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1981). Fathers may also assume a companion and playmate role with their children and leave much of the teaching and discipline to mothers (Stoneman, Brody, & Abbott, 1982). Considering these two situations together, fathers of retarded children may be more dissatisfied with parenting because the retarded child may be less able to share in play activities and the father is required to provide more caretaking and helping. In addition, their wives may be more involved with the child and

have less time and energy to devote to spousal role demands. Consequently, fathers may also feel less satisfied with their marriage.

A second purpose of this study was to investigate several factors that could mediate the influence a retarded child has on parents. As the model predicted, the child's temperament was an important condition in explaining parent satisfaction and marital adjustment. A pleasant, easily managed child, whether disabled or not, influences how the parents feel about their parenting and marriage.

Personal control is another intervening factor that may help explain why some parents are negatively affected by a family crisis such as the birth of a disabled child. Those parents who retain a high personal efficacy, because of psychological resources or external supports, may be less adversely affected by this type of family crisis. Therefore, though the disabled child may create stress for the parents and their marriage, it may not be the case for all spouses, especially for those who maintain a high level of personal control.

In conclusion, while further study is needed with larger, more random samples, the results showed that having a retarded child had little influence on the relationships within the family based upon measures of marital adjustment,

parent satisfaction, and family strengths. The influence of a retarded child appears to be more specific to individual spouses in terms of the gender of the parent, the parent's perception of the child's temperament, and their feelings of personal control.

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TABLE 1

GROUP MEANS AND MEANS BY SEX OF PARENT
ON ALL DEPENDENT MEASURES

SCALE	PARENTS OF RETARDED CHILDREN			PARENTS OF NONDISABLED CHILDREN		
	Group	Husband	Wife	Group	Husband	Wife
Family Strengths	46.7	45	49	45.6	45	46
Dyadic Adjustment	107.4	105	110	107.5	108	107
Parent Satisfaction	37.3	36	38	39	39	39
Rewards of Children	53.1	53	53	55.1	55	55
Child Temperament	42.8	43	43	45.2	45	45
Personal Control	17.2	17	17	18.6	19	18

FIGURE 1

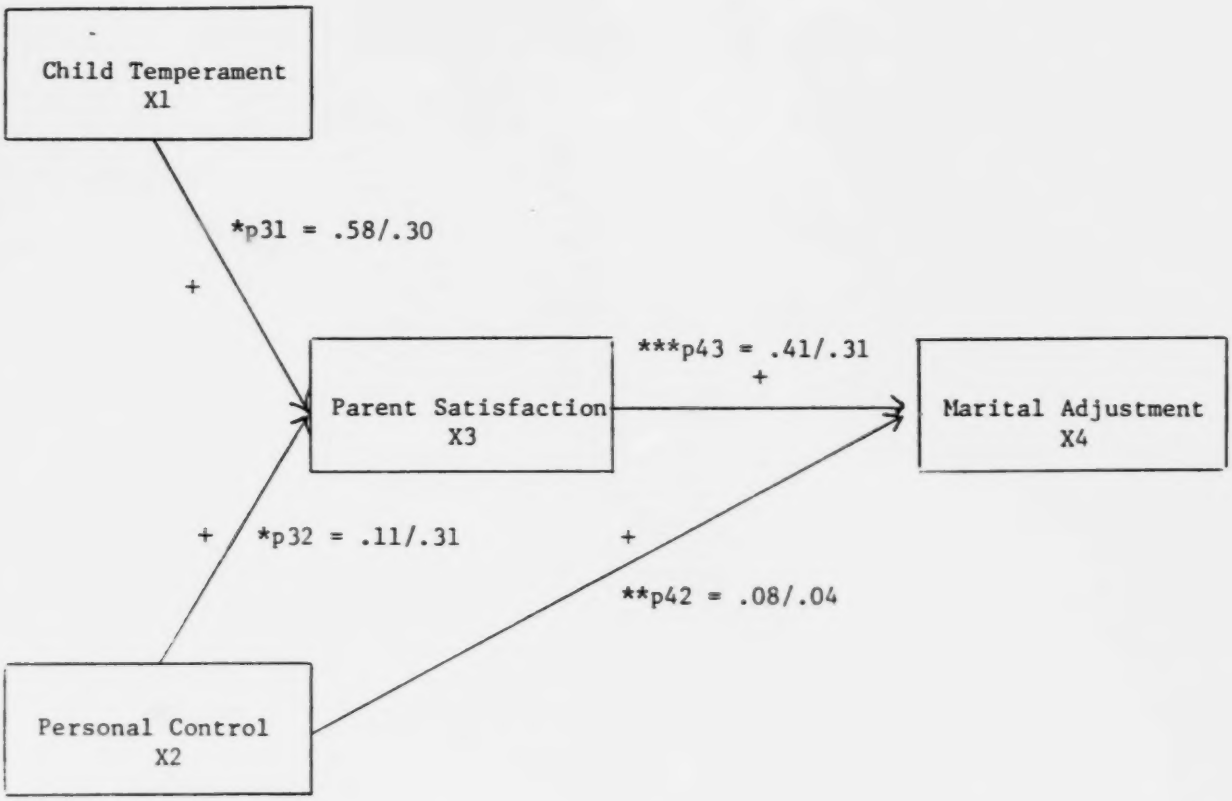

Figure 1: A prediction model of marital and parental satisfaction with path analysis results included. The first coefficient in the above figure is for the parents of retarded children and the second coefficient is for the comparison sample.

* When these causes are considered independent of each other, their path coefficients are equal to the zero order correlation with the next endogenous variable. Therefore, r13 = p31 = beta 31, and r23 = p32 = beta 32.

** r24 = p42 + p43r23

*** r34 = p43 + p42r23